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Chapter VIII. Songs and Legends

(1)

533 Singing is an important aspect of Miao life. Regardless of sex and age, almost all of them are talented singers. When we were traveling in the Miao mountains, the clear voices of Miao singers always struck our ears. In the deep woods of the high mountains with no one in sight, it usually gave us the poetic feeling that,

"The singing has ended; no one is in sight;
Only some mountain peaks remain green above the river."

831 Singing is the most natural medium of communication between
152 human hearts. The Miao have made full use of it. When a man
533 and woman fall in love, they sing to each other in order to express their mutual admiration. Inexpressibly happy at a reunion after a long separation, they sing to each other to express their happiness. Bidding farewell at a crossroad, they sing to express their sorrow at parting. Worn out during the busy seasons of agricultural work, they sing for physical relaxation. On festive occasions, they sing to add to the gaiety. In short, all their emotions—misery and happiness, grief and joy—are frankly expressed by singing.

533 Usually they sing their songs in dialogue style—such as between a man and a woman or between a host and a guest, etc. Due to long use, many of the songs have become formalized, so that the words of the replies are fixed. The ability to sing is very important in Miao social relations. For instance, their marriage is usually
584 based upon love. And singing is the principal means of courting.
533 /71/ On the fine spring days, Miao boys and girls usually go out in groups to sing to one another on the neighboring slopes. As the singers gradually draw closer, at this point, if you are a talented singer capable of answering your counterpart in the proper way,
533 victory will be yours. Otherwise, if the singing beauties move
[571] away because of poor answers, how depressed you would feel! At a fine banquet, when the hosts and guests sing alternately to each other, the good singers are always admired by the audience while

/71 cont'd/

533 poor ones cannot help being laughed at. Singing is an indispensable talent for the Miao in their social relations.

(2)

Their songs differ according to locality, and in general can be divided into two groups in accordance with two different styles, i.e., the free songs without set words and songs with fixed words. Generally speaking, the love songs and other songs of pleasure or sorrow are mostly of the former group, and every singer is a spontaneous composer. They sing what they feel at the moment.

533 The formal songs, which are sung at wedding feasts, in re-
●571 ligious ceremonies, or between hosts and guests, are of the latter group with fixed texts and are uniform throughout the Miao area. These are not natural outflows of feeling but rather songs of still formality. Everyone can recite these by heart without requirement of talent. The free songs, however, are more flexible; whether the song is good or poor depends upon the talent of the individual singer.

Because the free songs have no fixed texts and because of language difficulties, we did not record them, which is a pity. However, there were copies of the fixed songs in almost every Miao family, as they are taught from generation to generation. We had a chance to collect a few samples. But they were all stiffly formalized. Hence, as far as artistic value is concerned, they can hardly be compared with the free songs cited before which were natural expressions of feelings.

533 /72/ Every aspect of the Miao life is expressed in singing.
536 The contents of their songs are, therefore, complex, multi-faceted, and all-comprehensive. We did not succeed in acquiring many of these songs. We shall now attempt to classify here those we did get:

(1) Songs relating to economic life, such as those sung during certain ceremonies in the process of ploughing or harvesting:

/87 cont'd/
533 another song (No. IV above). It can be seen that the hosts' part
585 mainly contains words expressing courtesy and humbleness. The
571 guests' part expresses praise, responding properly to the feelings of the former.

574 V. During ordinary social occasions, for example, when a guest
533 comes from a distant place to stay in the village, at night the villagers sing the following song to the guest:

539 A famous goose waits to judge Heaven and the Sun.
A dry space /?/ withers in a pool of water.
/88/ A distinguished chief of the Hall of Filial Piety has come to this village!
The capital has sent ten thousand government servants to assist.
The heavenly lord with his generals rises suddenly to judge Heaven and the Sun.
All the officials and stars have prepared to welcome you.
/One line omitted here because of obscurity of meaning./
The lamps have been lighted early in the village.
People have come down from Peking and the Emperor.
From all four sides, old and young have come here.
All the streets and houses have been ready for days,
Descending into the world is hard to do.
The weather is cold and wall tops are shattered by thunder,
Causing leaves to blow about in confusion.
We wish the middle of spring would arrive,
So that the bamboo trees would put out new leaves.

765 Another song is one sung at the end of the tso chai ceremony.
533 When the Taoist priests are about to leave, the host's wife sees them off by singing it.*

/* This song is not included here because omission of too many words in the original renders translation impossible. —Tr./

4:Mickey E-5 (1940-?) 1947 AE5 Miao AE5

THE daily tasks of living furnished the framework for group activities within the family and between families. Such activities included those connected with the transplanting and harvesting of rice, the cleaning of stables and the transportation of fertilizer, fishing and digging for water chestnuts, going to the mountains for firewood, and to market to sell and buy, and the construction and repair of a house, for these in which members of several households worked together were greatly enjoyed in the doing and always followed by a special meal furnished by the owners of the house, stable, or fields worked upon that day. When they went to market they waited until several had their loads ready before starting off. They also returned in groups and stopped to rest and talk at a point about half way, where they could drink from a spring or in a wayside teahouse.

When a household was of the extended family type living in a connected group of buildings, they furnished among themselves a good deal of social life, for men and women worked together or the women in their group, children played together, and together they gathered around the firepits to eat, talk, and smoke. On rainy days the women also came together to sew, make thread, and mend. Even when the buildings were more separate, the homes tended to be grouped so that the households mingled freely and helped one another at work or in the entertainment of guests. A group of girls were often seen in the home of one of them embroidering, chatting very gayly over designs and plans, smoking, and laughing. The village was not extensive and there was constant opportunity to meet and talk, with much teasing and laughter. Women carried leaves of tobacco in the folds of their turbans, men in rolls in little metal boxes; pipes and tobacco were shared in a group.

Calendric feasts afforded the opportunity for both interfamily and intervillage activities. The festivals of the lunar New Year, Ch'ing Ming, and San Yüeh San, as well as lesser festivals such as Tuan Yang and Hsiao Mang, were accompanied by offerings to the house

4:Mickey E-5 (1940-?) 1947 AE5 Miao AE5

god and ancestral spirits. Bullfights, which were the greatest social events of the year, for many villages joined in them and those from a distance were overnight guests in nearby villages, had a deep religious significance, and one each twelfth year was a sacrifice. There was no religious element connected with the departure of a bride for her husband's village, with the activities in his village, nor with the setting up of a household after a child was born.

These work-tasks and festivals involved varying numbers of people. For example, field work at harvest time and at rice-transplanting time sometimes involved a number of related households, with as many as thirty people working together. When the men moved blocks of stone or logs in house-building, as many as a dozen men worked together, helping the house owner with his task. In tiling the roof, some men carried the tiles from piles in another part of the village; others handed these from the carriers' baskets to the men on the roof, who laid the tiles in place. This operation involved fifteen or sixteen men. The man who took the lead in all of these activities was not necessarily the owner of the property concerned, but some one man more skilled in these operations than the others, a semi-specialist. One individual, the carpenter, seemed to come nearest to being a fulltime specialist of the men in the village. Leadership in the larger of the calendric feasts fell on the village elders.

The Family. The Cowrie Shell Miao family has already received some attention. It was the basic institution in their society, since most work activities and rituals were carried on within it. When tasks such as housebuilding and ceremonies such as bullfights required larger numbers of people, members of different households and even villages got together for these purposes.

Political Institutions. The Cowrie Shell Miao were Chinese citizens, and officially entitled to the same rights and privileges as other Chinese. Their form of local government was Chinese. The leaders of the village

A /35 cont./
M outbreak of serious /36/ illness, it is his business to have the
546 shaman summoned and then to play the role of assistant in his
756 performances.

d) Age Classes, Clans, Secret Societies, Rank Organization

A Secret societies and clubs, as well as age-class organiza-
M tions are unknown among both peoples. Neither among the
571 Meau nor among the Akha did I find any indication of the
114 existence of a clan /Klan/ system nor of individual clans.
614 Nevertheless, ancient Chinese sources often mention clans among the various Meau tribes (1). Also in the works of French

1. Eberhard, II, p. 274.

authors the term comes up occasionally. In the latter cases one can easily see that the authors confuse clan and sib, that is, they use the term "clan" in place of "sib." Possibly the Chinese authors also use "clan" in a different sense than it is used in German ethnography. There are no guilds, organizations of merchants or craftsmen, ranks, castes, or nobility.

M Among the Meau, in addition to the free there are also
592 the unfree, who, however, are not to be confused with slaves.
[736] In the case of the unfree, it is rather a matter of Meau who are alone, whose relatives have died as a consequence of war, sickness, or old age, and who, having grown up within the unit of the large family, now have no possibility of enduring the struggle for existence as solitary individuals. In the forests of Farther India the isolated individual is not equal to the struggle for existence. The larger the community, the easier is the struggle for survival. The Meau is well aware of this fact and
M strives at all costs to enlarge the community. Thus it is the
[842] self-evident aim of the Meau to have as many children as
M possible, and he demands ten children and more from each of
[737] his wives! Despite the great fertility, however, there are

Akha A04
Miao AE5

/36 cont./

M 592 737 always solitary old people; above all, epidemics have caused whole sibs to die out! Thus it happens relatively often that an individual in old age does not have the care to which he is entitled according to the social organization. Such survivors of an extinct /37/ community turn to the head of a powerful large family, one which consists of as many members as possible, and ask permission to put themselves under its protection. Such a petition is never rejected, even if it comes from an old person who will be only a burden to the large family. Such unfree persons are given their sustenance, and they try as well as they can to be useful to the community.

A 466 Among the Akha there is no distinction between the free and the unfree. Here the rich man hires the poor for work in the fields and pays them for their labor. These workers, however, do not live in the house of the employer and are completely "free" in every other respect. Thus, among the Akha A 737 solitary old men live completely alone; only in the case of old women does it sometimes happen that they attach themselves to a friendly family. This does not in any way affect their position as "free" Akha.

A M 567 [648] Among the Akha there are no slaves at all in the true sense of the word, and among the Meau only in the form of debt-slaves (cf. the chapter, "Law and the Administration of Justice," section on "Property Law"), who are usually sold to Chinese traders, in which case, however, the seller as well as the buyer usually have in mind the sale of the individual for purposes of adoption. This has already been discussed in detail in the section, "Organization of the Family," in this chapter.

A M 571 114 On the basis of all that has been said, there is true father-right among the Meau as well as among the Akha. It would be mistaken to speak of the influences of mother right, totemism, and even promiscuity, as is done by older authors with reference to the Meau. It also seems to be overshooting the mark when, on the other hand, a "patriarchal original-culture" /"vaterrechtliche Urkultur"/ is discussed, as in

39: Bernatzik--64 E-5 (1936-1937) 1947 AO1 Thailand
AKha A04
Miao AE5

/37 cont./

A M 571 114 Witek (1). Aside from the fact that it is on the whole

1. Page 156.

problematical to use the concept "original culture" in connection with a people living today, it is especially inappropriate in the case of a people with such a highly developed and complicated social and political organization as the Meau. It also seems to me that the remark by Seidenfaden (2), that the Meau

M [171]

2. Page 167.

follow the Chinese and the Han with regard to a good way of life and the organization of the family, is correct only if qualified.

/38/

Chapter 6

Political Organization

a) Organization of the Greater Community

M 631 From the historical traditions of the Meau (cf. the chapter, "History") it is shown without any doubt that they formerly had a tightly organized kingship. Even today major political units are said to exist in the lands neighboring Thailand. Concerning the French territories, Lajonquière reports (1): "In

Page 320.

M [648] regions where Meau groups have congregated, they are subdivided into tribes which, freeing themselves from the mediation of the communal chiefs of the Tho (Thai), negotiate directly with the quanchau or chiefs of the sectors. In general they form aggregates and live independent of the communities of those peoples on whose land they dwell. These aggregates

/212/

535 [788] [783] [562] The Meau do not have any processions, purification procedures, or penances, but cultic dancing is known, as has already been described in detail. As will be recalled, the dance is purely sacral among the Meau, is performed only by men, and is always accompanied by the playing of mouth organs. The Meau women therefore do not dance at all, since they do not perform any cultic dances. In accordance with this attitude toward [177] dancing, the Meau do not know any borrowing or loaning of dances.

778 411

Figs. 53-55. Spirit-swords of the Meau.

[531] Figs. 53-55. Spirit-swords carved out of wood, with simple linear designs made with charcoal, 1/18 nat. size. Fig. 55. Spirit-sword made of bronze, 1/20 nat. size.

794 571 [881] [782] Unknown, too, are any religious societies or clubs, such as, say, a joining together of the young people at the time of initiation, since nothing like this is known, and, as has been said, no sacrifices are offered at the onset of puberty.

532 778 [779] The concept of the totem is likewise unknown to the Meau; no idols are erected and there are no plastic representations of gods or ancestors. Although the everyday life of the Meau reveals an intimate association with their ancestors and spirits, they limit themselves to erecting places of worship for them, but not images.

AKha A04
Miao AE5

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M /460 cont./
147 somewhat soft /461/ and plaintive, especially in comparison
M with the Akha women, who are superior to them in hardiness, as
147 these people generally are in relation to the Meau. I found
482 among the Meau of both sexes particularly good and reliable
[609] porters, though, in general, they perform porter-service for strangers very unwillingly. After they had once declared themselves ready to come to terms, however, the men as well as the women, without another word, took on loads up to 50 kilograms, walked along with these on their backs so rapidly that we could hardly keep up with them, and steadfastly kept their promise.

M The opposite of this pronounced mountain-folk character
147 of the Meau is formed by their valley-dwelling neighbors, the
181 Lao and the Schan /Shan/, who represent typical tropical peo-
171 ple of the valley lowlands. They are accustomed to having Nature pour everything from her horn of plenty into their laps without any effort, they love idleness, and they are lazy and indolent, for a single annual harvest abundantly feeds the family. They, too, are cheerful, but unreliable and flighty. The Lao were indeed easy to persuade to serve as porters, but they would complain even if the loads weighed only 18 kilograms and usually ran away after one day!

M The Meau treat women and children, as well as the
576 subordinates and unfree (see the chapter, "Social Organization," the section, "Age Classes, Secret Societies, Rank Organization") well throughout and are courteous to superiors without being
M humble. Abadie (1) also points out: "The Meau women are
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1. Page 151.

cheerful, gay, and not very shy, especially when they have acquired confidence."

M Among one another the Meau are very friendly and
● 571 have a pronounced property sense. Whereas with regard to foreign
[648] people any violation of their property rights immediately arouses
[152] their warlike instincts, among the unmarried lads even the female sex cannot provoke any deep enmities; for these reasons duels
M are unknown. Such behavior is quite plausible in view of their
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